

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 4 OCTOBER 1, 2006

CONDITIONAL ADMITS AND THE ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT CENTER

Shirley E. Arnold
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What is an Office of Admission to do with applicants who do not fit exactly into an institution's matrix of scores (SAT/ACT, GPA) for automatic acceptance? No doubt, some schools feel they have the luxury of rejecting all such students out of hand. But others of us are more likely to give such students a second look—not simply because we are tuition-driven and want the numbers, but also because we recognize that the right kind of college education can awaken skills and talents that have lain dormant in such students throughout their high school careers.

One approach for dealing with applicants whose scores indicate a certain element of academic risk is to admit them "conditionally." In the remainder of this article, I want to focus on strategies for successful use of a category of "Conditional Admits" (CA's). Unfortunately, there is no Easy Button™ to guide an Admissions officer to the "right" student, but there are certain considerations that can help make the decision process both easier and more equitable.

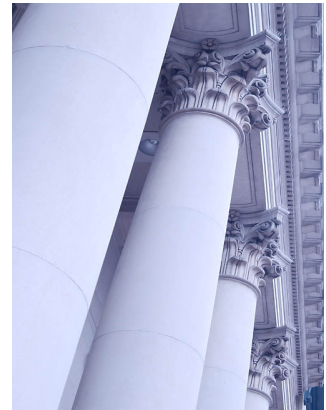
My 20+ years of experience in higher education – as a Director of Admissions and now as the Director of an Academic Enrichment Center – confirms my belief there is a place for Conditional Admit students. To make successful use of such a category, however, a college must examine its track record in working with "at risk" students in order to establish clear and consistent guidelines in each of the following areas:

- The lowest acceptable total standardized test score, the lowest verbal score, and an amplification of that score in some sample of student writing (e.g. an essay).
- The lowest projected college grade point average.
- How many teacher/counselor recommendations are required and what information needs to be included in such recommendations.
- What on-campus interviews must be conducted: admissions, faculty, and/or Director of the Academic Enrichment Center/ equivalent position.
- What is the total number of CA's who can be accepted annually, based on support staffing availability.

Even with these guidelines established, a system of checks and balances must be in place to assure equity in the treatment of students. This is especially necessary in cases where a college admissions staff operates under a quota system. An admissions counselor who is below his/her quota might be tempted to recommend an at risk student to help reach the quota in order to keep his/her job. A student with low scores may stand a better chance of being admitted in July or August than he or she would have had the application been processed in February. Or an admissions counselor may have developed a strong bond with a student and family, and thus may have difficulties in making an objective decision without some outside assistance.

(see *Conditional Admits* p.2)

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CONDITIONAL ADMITS CONTINUED:

In my own situation, I am most fortunate to work with an admissions team that is professional in looking consistently for the right match between a prospective student and our college. Because I have walked in their recruiting shoes, I fully understand the pressures they face. I am fortunate in that the admissions staff allows me to be the outside “check” in the process of admitting any student who is a potential academic risk. I believe this cooperative relationship allows the admissions counselor to bond with the student knowing that someone outside the admissions office can make the crucial call on acceptance or rejection, if needed. I see it as part of my job to keep a running tabulation of test scores and GPA’s of all “at risk” students whom we consider, so that I can be consistent with my decisions, no matter the time of year.

Among the most vital pieces of information for consideration in the decision making process are the student essay and personal interview. The student essay tells the reviewers much about the student; personally, I want the student to convince me that he/she is ready for, and even excited about, the challenges of college. There are times I request an interview with the student, preferably face to face. Why? The student who looks me in the eye to answer my tough questions has a better chance of convincing me he/she is worth the risk. If that cannot be arranged then a phone interview is acceptable.

In determining our CA guidelines, we have determined that two teacher recommendations are necessary; and in the case of athletes, these recommendations cannot be from coaches who also teach the student. More times than not, the teacher/coach talks more about athletic character rather than academic ability. The VP of Enrollment Management and I are considering preparing a standardized form for teacher recommendations for these at risk/conditional admit students. Our belief is that the more specific academic information we receive, the better decision we can make as an institution. We do not want to commit our resources to students who will not be able to take full advantage of them; and we do not want to bring to our campus students who do not have a good chance to succeed!

When we decide to admit a student with “conditional” status, we send the student a standard CA contract from the Admissions Office. Included in that standardized contract is

a required contact with me as the Director of the Academic Enrichment Center. Two weeks prior to fall orientation, I follow up with individual letters to the students stating the procedure to follow in making contact with my office to create an individualized academic success plan. (It is important to note that we maintain complete confidentiality with our conditional admits; apart from records kept by the admissions office and my office, there is no other public identification given or stigma incurred by a student with CA status).

Once classes begin, a follow up individual email goes out to CA’s reminding them of the requirement to be in contact with me. The purpose of the initial meeting I have with each student is to prepare an academic agreement geared to that person’s individual needs. Such an agreement usually involves meeting with me or with one of my staff on a weekly basis; it may also involve making use of other support services such as the Writing Lab, Math Lab, or peer tutoring. The student and I both sign the agreement as a declaration of our partnership toward completion of a successful academic semester.

Getting students to come in and make regular use of the services of the Academic Enrichment Center is not as difficult as might be expected. Once marginal students realize that the AEC is used by a wide variety of other students and that no one knows who is “required” to be there and who is there simply because it is a pleasant place to “hang out,” coming into the space becomes a lot easier for them. Of course, not all students make the best use of the resources available in the Center for their assistance: some use their time surfing the internet instead, or doing whatever it is they do on “Face Book”! Such students often learn the harsh reality of academic suspension as a result of not using their time wisely. We hope, though, that they realize their failure is not a reflection of their abilities, but rather a reflection of their choices, and of behaviors that they have the capacity to change.

On the other hand, students who take seriously their academic agreement and use it as an opportunity to build appropriate study and time-management skills end up gaining enormous confidence in themselves. Many of them attain a CGPA of 2.0 or better by the end of the first semester. If they do, all conditions are dropped and they move to regular admission status.

In the three years that we have had this system in place, our retention of at-risk students has risen markedly. Indeed, it is a fascinating fact that some of our (*see Conditional Admits p.3*)

CONDITIONAL ADMITS CONTINUED:

“conditional admits” end up becoming our strongest student leaders and our brightest success stories. Their achievements bolster our confidence that we are not just in the admissions “business” because we care about enrollment and tuition figures; we do the work that we do because we see the tremendous difference it can make in individual lives.

IDENTIFYING PROSPECTIVE ADULT STUDENTS

April Clark
CAS

One of the challenges for colleges and universities in the twenty-first century is to keep adult programs full of qualified students. This segment of our society has many options. They are usually working full-time, have families with multiple activities, and have many other competing activities for their available time.

We have identified certain segments of our consumer database that are more likely to respond favorably to contacts from colleges and universities looking to recruit adult students. When thoughtful, insightful contacts are made to this group, they are motivated to contact the institution to find out more information. Institutions

that are able to increase the size of their adult customer bases will be able to effectively encourage more prospective students to apply for admission and enroll.

The first step is to identify a multi-sourced, clean database that is easily accessible 24/7 for queries and orders. The database needs to provide targeting options based upon age, income, gender, number of years in school, and geographic location. The specific criteria for the selects must be school and program specific.

The compiled file is a source for postal addresses, phone numbers and email addresses for marketing outreach. You may want to market using multiple channels until you find the approach that works best for you.

After an appropriate list has been compiled, the name of the direct marketing game is Test! Test! Test! You pull certain age groups with certain incomes and send out a mailer or an email to test the waters. Your direct marketing effort, regardless of mechanism, must be balanced with regard to creativity, message and demographic make-up of the targeted list of prospective students. Getting this balance often is a challenge. The efforts are worthwhile when the number of adult students enrolled increases.

A NEW DIRECTION AT FERRUM COLLEGE

John W. Dysart
President
The Dysart Group, Inc.

The latest recruitment, financial aid and enrollment numbers have been finalized for the year and Ferrum College is shining! This small, liberal arts college located in Ferrum, Virginia has been a constant in the Commonwealth for almost a century, but the last two years have brought the institution to the forefront and people are taking notice.

While many competitors in the state and the region are struggling with recruitment, discount rates and retention, Ferrum College stands out from the crowd. Presidential leadership and strong support from the Board of Trustees have served to literally transform the physical plant of the campus. A new recruitment plan implemented in the last eighteen months has resulted in increased new student enrollments and overall gains in the number of full- (see *A New Direction At Ferrum p.4*)

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A NEW DIRECTION AT FERRUM CONTINUED:

time undergraduate students. The plan, focused on direct marketing, has generated exciting outcomes. Positive changes in the financial aid process and in institutional financial aid programs have provided sufficient amounts of merit financial aid to attract good students while ensuring that significant aid resources are available to qualified students based upon financial need.

Nothing makes recruitment and retention success easier than product improvements. We sometimes hate to admit it, but student satisfaction is at the heart of success. Much has been accomplished in recent years under the leadership of Ferrum's President, Dr. Jennifer Braaten.

- New resident halls have been built with an emphasis on apartment style living.
- The student center has been improved to accommodate the needs and desires of millennial students.
- Smart classrooms have been established with an emphasis on utilization of the latest technology.
- Meeting spaces for students, faculty and administrators have been expanded.

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- Ferrum has invested in a new alumni conference center.

In short, Dr. Braaten, with the support of the Board of Trustees, has initiated and is on the verge of completing the most significant improvements in the physical plant of the College in at least 50 years!

While total enrollment at Ferrum College has been stable for many years, administrators sought to increase the number of enrolled students significantly. The idea was to ensure that enrollment growth coincided with strategic investments in the physical plant in order to take full advantage of increased College capacity.

A new recruitment model was introduced over the last eighteen months. The first priority was to focus upon direct marketing rather than general marketing strategies. The College did not consider future investments in mass media advertising such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines. While these mechanisms might be appropriate for some schools, it was determined that there were better and more cost-effective ways to appeal to college bound high school students.

Direct mail letters authored by successful graduates were utilized to communicate with prospective students and their parents.

Systematic communication via telephone, email and personal visits between admission counselors and prospective students was initiated. Contact rates were tracked on a weekly basis and the quality of contacts with prospective students was evaluated based upon comparative folder completion rates, acceptance rates, visit rates, financial aid application rates and deposit rates.

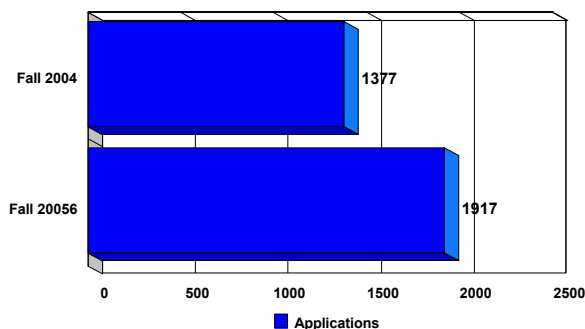
Perhaps the most important element for a successful recruitment plan pertains to the training, supervision, support, motivation and leadership of admission counselors. Ferrum College benefited from the extraordinary seasoned and intelligent leadership of the Director of Admission, Gilda Woods.

The results of the new initiatives have been impressive. Admission applications have increased by nearly 40% in the last two years. New student enrollments are up by more than 36%. (see *A New Direction At Ferrum p.5*)

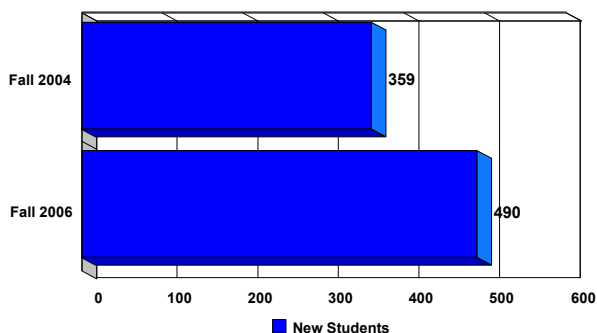


A NEW DIRECTION AT FERRUM CONTINUED:

**Admission Application Comparison
Fall 2004 versus Fall 2006**



**New Student Enrollments
Fall 2004 versus Fall 2006**



The Financial Aid Office has been very influential in the transformation at Ferrum College. Under the leadership of Heather Hollandsworth, the Financial Aid Office has undergone a dramatic change in a very short period of time.

Heather has insisted upon taking primary responsibility to ensure that all prospective new students and all returning students apply for financial aid as soon as possible and that they complete their financial aid folders as early as possible. The results of her leadership have been impressive. More aggressive support to encourage new and returning students to apply for financial aid and complete their folders have increased financial aid cash flow by more than 130% in less than two years!

Let's discuss outcomes:

- Ferrum College registered the largest number of new students in the last 20 years.
- The number of honor students increased by 73% over the last two years.
- New student enrollments have increased by 37% in just the last two years.
- Financial aid processing has improved dramatically. Cash flow has been enhanced as efficiencies have been applied to the financial aid process.
- Ferrum College now educates more than 1,000 qualified students!
- The campus physical plant has been transformed.

Ferrum College has completely repositioned itself in a short period of time. Increased revenue from increased enrollments will be invested back into the educational product. Obviously, currently enrolled students will benefit from continued improvements but the enhanced educational product will make the institution even more attractive to prospective students.

HOW DID IT GO THIS YEAR?

John W. Dysart
President
The Dysart Group, Inc.

We have completed another year in enrollment management. The following questions are designed to make readers evaluate their results this cycle with a critical eye. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list applying equally to all colleges and universities. The intent is to encourage thought and examination of outcomes.

- **Did you generate significant increases in admission applications this year?**

The number of admission applications is so important. More applications present an opportunity to increase new student enrolments if that is part of your strategic objective. More applications provide an opportunity to be more selective if your intent is (*see How Did It Go This Year? p.6*)

HOW DID IT GO THIS YEAR? CONTINUED:

to increase academic quality. More applications translate into more demand and increased demand allows institutions to meet specific recruitment objectives in a variety of areas.

Make sure that your increase was not a result of aggressive application fee waivers. If you have not realized an increase in applications this year it is time to ask why.

- **Were at least 80% of your applicants for admission either accepted or denied admission?**

No matter how many students applied for admission at your college or university, an efficient recruitment operation would have effectively encouraged students to complete their admission folders so that a determination on eligibility for acceptance could be made. Folder completion rates below this mark are likely an indication of lack of consistent and systematic communication and follow-up with admission applicants. Given the expense of generating admission applications, one would want to ensure that prospective students were at least notified of their eligibility to enroll before they made a decision on whether or not to attend.

- **Are you surprised by your recruitment or retention results?**

Success in meeting enrollment objectives is gratifying and failure can be difficult. Regardless of outcomes, the worst result is a surprise. If your new student numbers were significantly higher or lower than you expected, then you have a problem. If your retention numbers are not in line with expectations then you have a problem. Enrollment management is a data-driven proposition. Institutions can experience increases and declines in recruitment and retention numbers for a variety of reasons. A surprise is a strong indication that your approach is not data-driven.

- **Are your numerical recruitment goals reasonable given your expectations with regard to academic quality?**

Bottom line, did you get the numbers at the expense of the type of students you intended to recruit? Did you recruit students with a reasonable expectation of success dependent upon your institutional mission and historical persistence and graduation rates? If not, why not?

- **Are AR balances within 98% of processed financial aid when one accounts for payment plans?**

By this time of year, all of the financial aid offered to both new and returning students should have been applied to student accounts. If any amount of financial aid from any source, including student and parent loans, is still outstanding you need to investigate further.

- **Did any students, new or returning, attend class without having their financial aid finalized, not cleared by the Financial Aid Office but finalized, before beginning classes?**

You have to understand the impact of policies that allow students to enroll and attend classes without their financial obligations being addressed. Some schools think that they have no choice but to allow students to attend classes even though financial aid has not been finalized and/or payment plans have not been signed. This approach is not good business for schools but is even worse for the students allowed to attend prior to finalization of payment arrangements.

For the college or university, cash flow is inhibited and this can have implications for payroll, debt service, investments in technology and general curricular and co-curricular service to students. It does not serve the institution well to place basic product services in jeopardy for faculty, administrators and the enrolled students they serve.

Allowing students to actually enroll before financial arrangements are made is even worse for the students. What are you going to do if you find out after the student has attended class that they cannot afford to be enrolled? What happens when financial expectations at the time of enrollment do not pan out? These questions are critical.

Some students may have been placed in situations where they have incurred costs that they cannot pay. After the fact, it is unlikely that sufficient amounts of financial aid will be available to cover the costs. The institution could be forced to expel the student for non-payment. This action, initially based upon giving the student a chance to finalize their financing after the start of classes, can kick the student out of class for the next term, but also kick the student out of higher education permanently! The host school is not going to release the transcript to other schools due to lack of payment. (*see How Did It Go This Year? p.7*)

HOW DID IT GO THIS YEAR? CONTINUED:

The host school runs the risk of denying higher education opportunities to the student for the rest of his/her life.

- **If you are unhappy in any way with your recruitment or retention plans, consider significant changes in the future.**

You need to reconsider your strategies and tactics for recruitment, financial aid and/or retention if you are disappointed in your final numbers. If you are not realizing revenue, recruitment or retention goals, you need to consider new approaches.

It is the time of year when we need to ask if the entire enrollment management plan worked. It is rare that colleges and universities meet all of their objectives every year with regard to cash flow, new student enrollments, overall enrollment, academic quality, total headcount and retention.

There is always room for improvement—that is a given. The key is to set reasonable goals in every aspect of enrollment management and expect reasonable outcomes. Regardless of the objectives, it is good policy to examine the initial goals on all fronts of enrollment. It is also important to understand that improvements are possible and that failure to realize modest goals is not acceptable.

At this time of year, every year, college and university leaders need to ask “How did It Go This Year?”



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